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AUTHOR	Palmer, Barbara H.
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ABSTRACT

This study explored quality assessment and accountability in Dutch university education using a case study approach. The Dutch national system of quality assurance is described, and developments since the mid-1980s are traced. The university case studies illustrate models which are being employed to implement the quality assurance system including Total Quality Management (TQM) and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). Comparisons are made between the Dutch and American approaches to achieving educational quality and the role of the respective governments in the process. While the American system emphasizes peer review, the Dutch process emphasizes external assessment but begins with an internal self-study. Interviews were conducted with educational leaders responsible for designing and implementing the system at the national level, as well as with students, faculty members, and administrators of departments, divisions, and institutions at four Dutch Universities. At the University of Groningen, the process of quality assessment was managed by influencing existing structures, while at the University of Amsterdam new structures and group process consultants were employed. The University of Limburg at Maastricht model is one in which the assessment of teaching and learning is embedded in existing faculty structures. The Dutch system is characterized as egalitarian, autonomous, democratic, and federated. Implications for American higher education include constraining the role of government and borrowing selectively from other systems of self-regulation. (Contains 31 references.) (SW)

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Lesjes van de nederlanders: Little Lessons from the Dutch to Promote Educational Quality

Barbara H. Palmer

Director of Institutional Research

Brandeis University

P.O. Box 9110

Waltham, Massachusetts 02254-9110

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Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

Abstract:

Using a multi-site case study approach, this study explores quality assessment and accountability in Dutch university education. It describes their national system of quality assurance, and the various models which are being successfully employed to implement it. It summarizes the range of apparent effects and influences which quality assurance has had on Dutch higher education. Finally, it invites comparison with American higher education to promote speculation about implications for policy and professional practice.

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Introduction:

Fundamentally, this paper is a case study of quality assurance in Dutch university education. It builds upon published and unpublished documentary sources, and incorporates information and insights gained from roughly thirty "key informant" interviews conducted during an eight week study visit in the winter of 1993 and the spring of 1994 which included Amsterdam, Groningen, Maastricht and Utrecht. Interviewed were students; faculty members; administrators at departmental, divisional, and institutional levels; researchers with a scholarly interest in this area; and educational leaders responsible for the design and implementation of the system on a national level. The basic methodology is uncomplicated and fairly primitive; in the words of Charles Adams "if you want to find out what's happening ask those who are making it happen as well as those to whom it is happening" (Adams, 1993) and compare their observations with one another and with whatever external objective sources are available. Initially, a structured interview format was employed; soon it was discarded for a more open-ended, subject-centered approach. Several general themes were explored: informants' level of knowledge with respect to Dutch quality assurance, their accounts of local changes and effects, their sense of the relationship between those changes and the national system of quality assurance, their personal assessment of the significance of such changes, their judgment of the criteria upon which the success of the system should be evaluated, and their assessment of existing "meta-assessment" efforts.

While this paper seeks to summarize faithfully the features of Dutch higher education and its quality assurance system, this is not its only objective. That goal has been accomplished many times over by numerous reporters (see for example, Goedegebuure et al, 1990; Kells, 1992; Maassen et al, 1992; Teichler, 1989; van Vught, 1991) who document the rightful claim of the Dutch as pacesetters in peer review-oriented assessment procedures and applaud the subtle wisdom and elegant compromise of their program in balancing the creative tension between the academy and the government, between educational improvement and public accountability. Throughout its inception and development during the last decade, the Dutch system of internal and external quality assurance has received a lot of attention. Articles on the subject appear frequently in European journals and talks abound at international conferences. While descriptive accounts are plentiful, reports dealing with concrete institutional initiatives and implementation models (Acherman et al, 1993; van Boetzelaer, 1993; van Boetzelaer & Verveld, 1990; Maassen & van Buchem, 1990) and with the effects of the national

program of quality assurance on Dutch university education (Frederiks et al, 1993; Lentz et al, 1993; Vroeijenstijn, 1990, 1993, 1994a) are less frequent. This paper is a small contribution to those slender literatures. Its larger significance may reside in its contribution to the development of a backdrop to facilitate reflection upon our own approaches to educational accountability and quality. Ultimately, it offers "little lessons" by which to inform our own professional practice.

"But Nobody Would Ask That Question in Holland!": Developing a Context for Comparison

American higher education consists of a collection of about 2140 four-year colleges and universities serving in excess of 8.5 million students (excluding two-year non-profit and proprietary institutions) in a system in which the fifty states, not the federal government, have primary responsibility and in which state governments provide 50% of the income for public institutions. We have a strong private sector which involves about 3/4 of the 4-year institutions and about a third of the students. The tuition cost for one year of undergraduate study averages in the neighborhood of $2700 at a public institution and could run to $20,000 at a prestigious private university. The range of educational missions for these institutions is equally wide with pre-professional, academic, personal growth and "education for responsible citizenship" goals often coexisting within a single institution. Almost all colleges and universities in America (as opposed to those institutions devoted almost exclusively to higher vocational aims) assume responsibility for some form of "general" or "liberal" education, a job commonly assigned to secondary education in Europe. A truly hybrid institution, the American university melds the goals of the Anglo-Saxon residential college and the German research university to which has been added the uniquely American mission of community service. The typical first degree takes four years to earn. Roughly 50% of those who start finish, and of those who finish 70% do so within five years. Accreditation, a non-governmental process to monitor educational institutions for threshold adequacy, has persisted for at least three-quarters of a century and has contained some form of external peer-review for at least fifty years.

Tiny Holland boasts of thirteen universities with a total enrollment of 180,000 students. (It also has a higher vocational sector comprised of 82 institutions and another 250,000 students, but this paper deals exclusively with the university sector.) Virtually all higher education is "public". 90% of the funds to support university education in the Netherlands comes directly from the government, through the Ministry of Education and Science. A flat tuition fee of 1950 NLG (about $1100) a year

applies at all Dutch universities. The singular goal of Dutch university education is to develop the capacity to undertake original research independently. By our standards, university education in Holland is highly specialized, with students selecting their field of study upon entrance and taking virtually all their work in that discipline. The first degree, roughly equivalent to a master's degree, is completed on average in 5.5 years with about 62-67% of those who begin finishing (van Vught, 1991). Somewhere between 12% and 19% go on to advanced work beyond the first degree. Dutch higher education, rooted in the German university model, has no tradition of internal or external quality assessment; its system, in place since 1988, is organized on a nationwide basis by discipline, not by institution and is devoted not to weeding out the inadequate, but rather to the twin objectives of improvement and public accountability. In contexts seemingly so different, what's to compare? At first blush it seems an ill-fated venture. These and other differences led often to comical misconceptions during the interview process, and led inexorably to the response "but that question would never be asked in the Netherlands," a phrase which came to exemplify the difficulty of finding shared threads from which to weave a common tapestry.

But important common threads exist, as can be seen from these 1991 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) data. Both countries devote a relatively large fraction of their gross domestic product to tertiary education -- 1.7% and 2.4% for the Netherlands and the U.S. respectively. For both countries higher education's share of total enrollments at all educational levels is above the OECD mean: 13.2% and 16.6% for the Netherlands and the U.S. respectively. Excepting Australia, at 29.8% and 34.4% respectively, the U.S. and Holland devote to higher education the highest fraction of total educational spending in the world.

But the more fundamental similarity derives from the almost universal political and economic climate in which higher education has operated in developed democracies since World War II. This climate has undergone dramatic changes in the last twenty-five years, almost convulsive in character in the past decade. The following scenario fits contemporary American and Dutch higher education equally well. The 1960's saw unbridled growth in higher education in terms of the number of students and institutions, as well as constantly escalating public budgets devoted to higher education. Improving the educational attainment of its citizens was seen as equally beneficial to the social and economic agendas of the nation and to the personal opportunities of each citizen. The goal of equal access became paramount. All students with appropriate school leaving certificates from

secondary school deserved access to higher education. Quality considerations were subordinate to the pursuit of a uniform level of institutional adequacy and comparability. Predictably enough, by the mid-1970's the system made an abrupt correction. Governments, unable to keep up with universities' appetite for funds, called for higher education to demonstrate greater efficiency and productivity. Essentially faculty-centered institutions were asked to become student-centered ones. The public and the government wanted more for their money, less wastage, and built in market incentives for quality improvement. A period of deep budget cuts ensued. In America entire state systems of higher education were nearly dismantled and private tuition rates skyrocketed as government support receded. In the Netherlands, in the five year period between 1980 and 1985 public expenditures for higher education decreased by 16% while student enrollment increased by 12% (Teichler, 1989).

Historically, the distribution of power in American higher education has favored strong central administrations at the institutional level, leaving only supporting roles for government and the faculty. In contrast, continental European systems have long been characterized as having a large governmental role, a comparable role for the guild of professors and a small to vanishing role for central university administrators (Kells, 1992). Ironically, in the past decade this balance has shifted, such that the regulatory environments for American and Dutch higher education are growing more alike at the same times that our respective pursuits of educational quality are taking different paths. While our federal government has been increasingly strident, intrusive and conspicuous in its demands for accountability and quality in American higher education, in 1985 the Dutch government adopted a deliberate strategy of "steering from a distance."

Making a Pact with the Devil: The Dutch Government and Higher Education in Pursuit of Quality

This new philosophy of "steering from a distance" came on the heels of several examples of heavy-handed, direct governmental regulation. There were the draconian retrenchment efforts already mentioned and the introduction of a "two tier" structure to university education by which to shorten study programs, decrease time-to-degree, and increase efficiency. Finally, 25% of research positions and other material resources were wrenched from regular university budgets as the government embarked on a program of "conditional funding" to increase accountability for government funded research and to promote quality (Teichler, 1989).

In 1985 the government changed course and issued its new policy document entitled "Higher Education Autonomy and Quality" (known as HOAK). From the government's perspective HOAK was a strategic and fairly risk-free retreat. The Ministry would share its power in order to promote self-regulating universities. It would move away from direct concrete law-making on the nuts and bolts of university management in exchange for a comprehensive program of quality assurance. The government's twin goals of accountability and quality would become the indirect results of the universities becoming less self-absorbed, more sensitive to external market conditions, and more likely to act in their own enlightened self-interest. Being more independent, the universities would be able to adapt more readily to changing economic and social conditions and to capitalize on opportunities.

To the cynical observer the government has little to lose. It is "sharing" on its own terms. Universities can only become autonomous to the extent and in the direction that the government desires (Maassen & van Vught, 1989). Moreover, resource constraints are envisioned for some time to come; with institutional funding based on the number of students enrolled and with a fixed to moderately decreasing supply of young people to populate Dutch universities, even institutions which become wildly successful in attracting a bigger fraction of potential enrolles may find that they are accomplishing little more than holding their own. Finally, the fate of "open access" is arguably threatened by some of these developments. Increased participation rates and financial aid budget constraints are on a collision course. Observers have speculated that the interaction of some of the new provisions represent a covert retreat from open access on the part of both the government and the institutions (Maassen et al, 1992). In a recent opinion survey of university faculties throughout the world, only in the Netherlands did a majority (57%) of the respondents reject the proposition that "access to higher education should be available to all who meet minimum entrance requirements" (Altbach et al, 1994), a reflection of the growing frustration over the apparent conflict between available resources, human and financial, and governmental expectations for improved productivity and quality. Any government wise enough to embark on a policy of "steering from a distance" has seen these eventualities on the horizon and recognizes the desirability of distancing itself from them.

It appears that the universities are still distrustful that the Ministry is serious about autonomy; moreover, they are unconvinced that the policy has heretofore led to the level of autonomy promised. Suspicions linger that quality assurance is just a blind from which to identify the victims for the next round of budget cuts. (To date, such suspicions are groundless.) Still the universities

were smart to overcome their reservations, and accept the invitation which HOAK represented. In doing so, they took leadership in defining the context for quality and the boundaries of accountability. The process promoted an unprecedented debate between higher education and government, defined their respective roles in pursuing quality, brought clarity to the areas of mutual agreement, heightened mutual understanding in areas of persistent disagreement, put control of the curriculum more firmly in the hands of the universities, and led to "probably the best example that has been developed" (Kells, 1992) of a self-regulating system emerging through dialogue and consensus building.

Building a System for External Quality Assessment (EQA)

The Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), founded in 1985 and comprised of representatives from the member universities, became the buffer agency through which the universities spoke with more or less one voice to the Ministry of Education and Science. Picking up the government's offer, the VSNU developed the national program of quality assurance for higher education. Internationalization being an important theme in contemporary Dutch higher educational policy, they examined closely a variety of quality assurance models in use elsewhere. The structure which emerged shows a strong resemblance to American accreditation in terms of its emphasis on peer review and visiting committees. But it shows important differences as well, notably in its philosophy and objectives, its focus, and its willingness to "go public."

Unlike American accreditation which is aimed at defining the floor below which an institution is drummed out of the corps, the position of the Dutch universities reflected the goals and methods associated with Total Quality Management (TQM) and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). While conceding the government's legitimate interest in accountability, their program is unabashedly "improvement" oriented and "process" based. The Dutch process emphasizes external assessment but begins with an internal self-study. A group of external experts use the self-study as a point of departure in conducting its on-site visit and in writing its subsequent report. The focus of the investigation is the discipline, not the institution. In a given year, several different disciplines are studied nationwide. A single visiting committee visits all universities providing instruction in the field. The process is cyclical, with all fields being visited within a six year period. This discipline-based aspect of the process reflects the power and decision-making structure of Dutch higher education, and specifically echoes the structure which was employed only two years earlier in evaluating university

research (Maassen & Weusthof, 1989). The formal reports of the visiting committee are submitted to the VSNU, accounts of which are routinely found in the newspaper. Initially, the reports of the visiting committees were faulted for understatement and "concealing language" (Vroeijenstijn, 1990), but more recent efforts demonstrate remarkable candor, for example, "in the opinion of the Committee there is too little time spent on teaching by the professors" or "quality assurance is nearly non-existent and should be improved" (IPR-EE Committee, 1992). The public aspect of the process speaks to the government's firmness in advancing its accountability aims. While in theory the public nature could promote strategic behavior toward generous evaluation, in practice it seems to keep the process honest, as does the fact that at least one member of every visiting committee is a true outsider, generally a member of the professorial ranks from a foreign country.

The Quality Police: The Inspectorate

In this transition from state-regulation to self-regulation, one aspect of the process, meta-assessment, remains in the hands of the government. The Higher Education Inspectorate, created in 1986, supervises the performance of higher education and advises the Minister of Education and Science. In performing its role as meta-evaluator it assesses the assessment process itself and its effectiveness. (Bresters & Kalkwijk, 1990; Kalkwijk, 1992) The Inspectorate likes to describe itself as independent, and in the sense that it determines its own methods for carrying out its obligations to the Ministry, it is. But among University personnel the Inspectorate is often described as the meddlesome mouthpiece of the government. Under certain condition the Inspectorate may undertake its own "additional" investigations on behalf of the Ministry which can in theory lead to the cessation of funding to chronically troubled programs. This possibility of direct intervention exceeds the role of meta-evaluation and has led to concern and criticism. Still, the Inspectorate plays an important role which could not be convincingly undertaken by the universities themselves. It maintains criteria against which to assess the reports of the various visiting committees. It argues for a more uniform format in visiting committee reports and for more quantitative measures to facilitate comparative judgments. And it puts pressure on universities to take action on the problems uncovered through the assessment process.

Among the VSNU and the universities there is predictable and understandable reluctance to invite comparisons, and worse yet, rankings. The Ministry suffers no such qualms, imagining a

world in which consumer guides would inform the process by which Dutch youth select a university. Such a guide, subsidized by the Ministry, has since hit the newsstands. The data do not really justify comparative judgments, and the result falls considerably short of altering the single factor which has long dominated university choice in Holland: proximity. Most Dutch students choose a university because it is close to home. But this event serves to demonstrate the sustained interest of the Ministry and its Inspectorate in making the results of this process accessible to the public. It also reflects the government's predisposition to view students as consumers, not as primary players in the quality assessment process itself (Paardekooper & Spee, 1990).

Students: "The Flowers of the Nation"

Students leaders are not content with the role of "consumer", voting with their feet and allowing "the rough hand of the market" to define their level of satisfaction with university education. They believe they have earned a place at the table as genuine partners in governance. They expect that their views will be taken seriously. Certainly, they have carved a far more substantial place for themselves in day to day university management than have their American counterparts. Students interviewed for this study, by no means a representative sample, demonstrated genuine sophistication in their grasp of the issues confronting the universities and in the political arena in which those issues must be addressed. Their knowledge base, the bounty of an enormous emotional and temporal investment, renders them a formidable force which American undergraduates cannot begin to match. To be sure, their participation is university affairs is not universally embraced. Some faculty informants showed evidence of good natured condescension, hinting that the "real action" still occurs behind closed doors; the government and the VSNU express reservations about the value of student participation. For the most part the student leaders identify more readily with the improvement-oriented motives they associate with their academic mentors than with the accountability aims they regard as the exclusive interest of the Ministry. But in this respect the students and the government agree: the machinery for internal and external quality assessment leads only to diagnosis, not necessarily to corrective action. They are interested in action and they see stronger central management as the key to change.

For the most part, Dutch educators hold their students in enormous regard and speak of them as junior, albeit limited, partners in scholarly pursuits. Nothing reflects the intensity of this

conviction more than the lovely metaphor used by one faculty informant repeatedly when referring to his students. His commitment to improvement in educational quality grew from his reverence in having been entrusted with "the flowers of the nation" -- not a trivial turn of phrase in a country where flowers are spiritual necessities of life.

Getting Teaching on the Agenda: The Faculty

"Getting teaching on the agenda" is almost a mantra, recurring over and over in discussions with Dutch educators about the value of their EQA program. The contemporary Dutch university, like the classical German model from which it derives, tends to be a loose federation of autonomous academic units with a comparatively weak central administration and a strong emphasis on research at the expense of teaching. A recent Carnegie Foundation study of the academic profession serves to demonstrate the extent of this favoritism; when asked "do your interests lie primarily in teaching or research", only 25% of Dutch respondents reported a preference for teaching, putting the Netherlands last among the thirteen countries studied. In contrast, 63% of the American academics surveyed favored teaching (Altbach et al, 1994). The language of this paper is itself misleading on this point. In referring to "the university" as if some monolithic institutional focus is descriptive of the Dutch case, it provides a disservice. In fact, there being no university-wide learning goals, the sort which our commitment to "liberal education" provides, in Dutch university education no natural forum exists beyond the department level for the discussion of teaching and curricular matters. And given the proclivity for research, at the department level the research goals of the unit monopolize the agenda. Given the power of autonomous academic departments ruled by the professorate and the weak influence of central administrative leadership, it is impossible to overstate the difficulty of "getting teaching on the agenda." Repeatedly, informants emphasized the truly revolutionary character of the entire venture. It was unheard of in the Netherlands that bureaucrats -- governmental or local -- would ask faculties to justify their activities.

In creating an unavoidable excuse for the discussion of teaching and learning, EQA has changed all that. The challenge to university leaders at all levels has been to build organizational structures to serve as forums for curricular and pedagogical debate and to promote internal quality assessment (IQA). As will be seen in the section on implementation models, the spawning of IQA processes and structures may be the most important effect of the national effort. While universities

took quite different approaches, one aspect was common to them all: the recognition that only a "bottom up" approach had the remotest chance of success. In part this is merely an acknowledgement that the bulk of the power resides at the "bottom," i.e. with the departments. In part, it reflects the basic wisdom that the pursuit of educational quality is at its heart a matter of modifying the behavior of the professional teaching force. Such a transformation is most likely to occur in quiet and informal ways, friend to friend, colleague to colleague, among people of good will. In the end progress depends upon instructors, collectively and individually, committing themselves to change. Hence, in designing their system, Dutch educators have shown a preference for peer-review over performance-indicators models and for qualitative rather than quantitative methodologies. One informant summarized the appeal of peer review in this way: "There is at best an imperfect relationship between policy and innovation. There are only people who are alive and whole and able to change. And others who for whatever reason cannot. The former may do so in response to any treatment which reinforces the idea that people care about their work and are eager to help them do better. The rest, forget about!"

"The Enemy Used to Live in the Hague": The Administration

University administrators are not well thought of by Dutch academics, but not being very important either, the absence of esteem for them is likely to be dismissive in character, a half-hearted swipe at a fly at a picnic. Hence, when asked to respond to the proposition that "the administration is often autocratic", the Dutch registered the lowest level of agreement -- 37% compared to 67% for American academics. (Altbach et al, 1994) Dutch administrators often describe themselves as "functionaries," a word choice which is neither accidental nor reflective of some vocabulary limitation in their use of English. Therefore, one of the most unsettling aspects of the Dutch quality mania is the strengthened role of the central administration in the affairs of academic life and its intrusion on the heretofore unilateral authority of the academic departments in matters of teaching and research.

Dutch universities employ heavily layered, egalitarian and complex governance structures, more so than any in western Europe (Teichler, 1989). Personal authority and singular responsibility are rare. Representatives from all aspects of university life participate in governance -- instructional staff at all ranks, deans, financial officers, support staff, technicians and students. An executive board serves in lieu of a chief executive; it largely implements the will of the university council. The

university council determines policy in matters such as administrative rules and budgets; it is commonly comprised of equal numbers of faculty, staff and students with a smattering of representation by outsiders from the local community. University-level management is oriented toward consensus, compromise, coordination and moderation. Analogous bodies similarly constituted exist in the faculties and departments. One informant, a student, admitted to spending 70% of his time in meetings. The administrative machinery being so ponderous and bulky, nothing happens fast. The emasculation of authority through dispersion as evidenced in the formal structure gives rise to pockets of informal power where traditional faculty dominance remains intact. Faculty members express their frustration with the "dampening effect of the layers" in preventing good ideas from coming to the top and in almost eliminating any chance for opportunistic and entrepreneurial action.

Dutch academics have an approach-avoidance conflict with administrative authority. They resent the emerging strength of central leadership. They resent the resources which are being funneled toward administrative personnel, as a new breed of non-teaching career administrators has come on the heels of quality assurance processes. While attachment abides to committee-based governance and to the democratic spirit it represents, observers recognize as well that it is inefficient and inadequate to the demands of changing times. They want strong management to remedy the problems which the quality assessment process has spotlighted. And they recognize that strong leaders are not likely to be attracted to the current structure. Faculty, students and administrators alike voice predictions that the days of consensus governance are numbered and fervent hopes for a new kind of inspired institutional leadership. Repeatedly, they described the need for a new breed of "education manager" to carry the banner of quality improvement in education.

Changing Organizational Culture: Implementation Models for Internal Quality Assessment

Arguably the biggest effect of EQA has been the variety of IQA processes which have arisen to support it. Universities took different paths in inventing structures to facilitate institutional self-assessment. From this study, three distinct models emerged, but the full range of implementation activities to be found in Dutch universities may be richer and more varied yet. Some universities redirected the agenda of existing agencies of governance. Others superimposed new organizational units to take on self-evaluation tasks.. Still others embedded attention to internal quality in fundamentally different staffing patterns at the faculty level. All reveal a kinship with the notion of

"quality by design," that "the improvement of quality does not come from inspection, or what in education might be termed assessment but from design -- from the continuous improvement of the underlying processes of education. (Dill, 1992)

In the Dutch case, the promoters of change, heretofore unheralded central administrative bureaucrats or faculty administrators, often do not control the underlying processes of education, nor do they wield significant power with the academics who have direct impact on classroom processes. Hence, each has tended to emphasize elements of structure and process which can be initiated without confronting head-on historically sacrosanct areas of professorial autonomy. They have set out to "realign the faculty's thinking... [and to bring] about changes in the culture of the university" (Maassen & van Buchem, 1990). By effecting change in the organizational culture and structures which support the educational process, they began to alter the nature of the process itself. One institution started with the most basic of goals -- to adopt a uniform academic calendar for the entire university. That the quest for common structures to support teaching and learning needed to begin here illustrated in dramatic fashion the extent of the organizational anarchy in Dutch universities.

Some institutions have taken a pro-active "cattle prod" (PCP) approach. The University of Groningen is in this camp. It chose to manage the process of IQA by influencing existing structures rather than by building new ones. The strengths of their approach are evident at the very beginning and the very end of the quality assessment cycle, in what are called "evaluation plans" and in fairly extensive follow-up activities to external visitation.

A unit's evaluation plan is a kind of blueprint of what a department is going to do in the next five years to be ready for formal self-study and visitation. (van Boetzelaer, 1993). It tends to prevent last minute unhappy surprises resulting from ignorance or neglect. Because the submission of the evaluation plan prompts prospective discussions with the university's executive board, central administrative authorities are reassured that the departments will be ready, that they will have been thinking about their goals and methods, and that they will have been gathering pertinent information along the way.

Groningen employs rather formal and elaborate follow-up activities in the wake of external visitation. The Department of Education, Research and Planning, which describes itself as "passive" in the assessment process itself but "active" in urging dialogue and follow-up, acts at a catalyst at several critical stages in promoting "passive utilization," i.e., talking about the reports and their

implications at various levels in the institution (Frederiks et al, 1993). So many opportunities for discussion make it more difficult for the faculties to avoid developing action plans to address the concerns of the visiting committees. Ultimately, the faculty and the vice chancellor come to agreement over what course of corrective action is in order, and these proposed local responses are codified in the annual report of the university to the Ministry.

The University of Amsterdam takes a different tack, one in which new structures and "group process" (GP) consultants play important roles. (Acherman et al, 1993) Three years ago a new position was created: the "quality manager of education." The post carries no responsibility for the mechanics of the university's compliance with external mandates for quality assurance. The incumbent, a former high school principal, possesses an appreciation for the complexity of teaching and learning, a respect for the culture of the university, and sophisticated group process skills. Here the notion that "one size fits all" is rejected out of hand, as patient group work allows problem identification and possible solutions to emerge from the faculties themselves. Eventually, the quality manager becomes a fairly distant ringmaster, monitoring a collection of short and long term, custom-tailored projects occurring at various levels in the organization. She also develops in others the skills which will allow such processes to become self-sustaining, e.g., the creation of a center for teaching methods, curriculum development programs, and change agentry training. The most ambitious project, currently in a developmental stage, involves the creation of faculty-based "institutes of education." Basically, this new structure is superimposed on existing agencies of academic governance to serve the purpose of ongoing criticism about teaching, to promote conversations among instructional personnel within the same faculty but with divergent research interests, and to provide some general coordination of student services. An "institute" it simply another policy body; it requires a staff of administrators at the faculty level to implement its will. The obvious problem with this approach is the addition of another collection of committees to an already bloated and ponderous structure. It also generates escalating demand for this new breed of academic manager, and people with such skills and interests are in very short supply in the Netherlands. The obvious strength of the approach is its fundamental recognition of the federated nature of academic life and the necessity that the natural units become the locus for change in teaching and learning. At least one promising prototype is underway.

The University of Limburg at Maastricht is the best example of a fully evolved federated model in which the assessment of teaching and learning is truly "embedded" (E) in existing faculty

structures. A young, specialized university, one of a kind and totally unlike the broad, classical universities so far discussed, its method is rooted in its commitment to problem-based learning, a philosophy which permeates the entire institution and tends to dictate much about its governance structures and academic culture. Pedagogy was the centerpiece of Maastricht's institutional mission long before educational effectiveness became a national priority. Maastricht's approach to quality assessment is to attach applied social science researchers to the various faculties. These individuals have regular teaching and research duties. The bulk of their "teaching" obligation is satisfied by overseeing and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning in the unit, and by assessing the effectiveness of their various evaluative instruments. The bulk of their research obligation is satisfied by publishing the results of this work, resulting in a substantial overlap between scholarly interests and applied research duties. If not entirely "one of the group," such personnel are at least "one with the group" in a deeper, more organic sense than any externally grafted research unit could be. This situation leads to sophisticated research designs, commonly embracing rigorous quantitative methodologies. Virtually all informants associated with other Dutch universities expressed suspicion and dislike for quantitative methods applied to education; Maastricht, in contrast, is a hot bed of number crunching. Given their problem-solving orientation, they need to devise assessment procedures which will measure instrumental goals. "Are the students better problem solvers?" becomes the most relevant question, and the answer is central to their professional lives. It is no more than a happy coincidence that it is also of interest in the Hague.

These models can be distinguished primarily by their placement along a continuum of sub-system autonomy. Here the three implementation models are displayed against the backdrop of Helsabeck's conceptual framework for college decision-making (Figure 1). The position on the vertical axis is a measure of participation in decision making and the position on the horizontal axis is a measure of centricity in decision-making (Helsabeck, 1973).

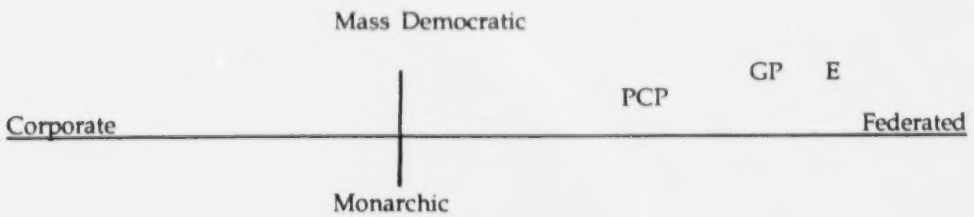

Figure 1: IQA models against Helabeck conceptual framework

Given the uniformly egalitarian and autonomous character of Dutch universities, it comes as no surprise that all examples are clustered in the same quadrant, by any standards very democratic and very federated. American examples in contrast, would certainly tend more toward corporate and less toward mass-democratic: some with extremely strong chief executives might even tend toward the monarchic.

"Will taking Professor van Dijk's temperature every day improve his quality?": What Works?

The Dutch are a pragmatic people, not enamored of philosophical posturing or circumlocution. They want to cut to the chase. What works? How do serious, well-intentioned educators go about the business of making university education better? After six years of experience with external quality assessment, involving 242 experts making 163 committee visits with a collective investment of 70 years and $13 million, what do they have a right to expect and what do they have to show for their efforts? (Vroeijenstijn, 1994b)

There is no question that Dutch universities have become more productive and more efficient. They are doing more with less. Moreover, there is considerable anecdotal evidence that the culture of the faculties is changing. The institutions in this study all reported curricular changes in response to EQA. Almost certainly the heightened recognition of the need for more extensive student services is associated with having asked students to evaluate their university experiences. Published studies reveal that a lot of local discussion is being generated by the various IQA activities. They also suggest that EQA prompts discussion at higher levels in the organization, and is more likely to lead to tangible changes. (Frederiks, 1993; Vroeijenstijn and Acherman, (1990). Finally, there is a general feeling of good will about the process of EQA and IQA, high levels of satisfaction and pride in the system, and enormous interest in it from other European countries. But in truth, there is precious little "hard data" to support these impressions, and frequently little reason to attribute the desirable results to the quality assessment program. In fact, several independent events may well be masking and/or neutralizing the effect of quality initiatives, including changes in the expected time-to-degree, student financial aid, and unemployment. In the summer of 1994, on the heels of the formation of a new government, Dutch higher education's prospects took a sudden, depressing turn with new rumblings of an upcoming budget-cut related to yet another proposed reduction in the normal length of study for the first degree. Determined to cut costs and diversify degree programs, the Hague seems

bent upon raising tuition (to about $1600 annually by 1998-99), reducing student stipends, and cutting roughly $300-million from the higher education budgets (Bollag, 1995).

These are not problems which admit to quick fixes, and the program of EQA is itself a "work in progress." It is clear that the second round of visits will be different -- yielding reports that are more structured, more explicit, and better able to stand up to comparative analysis (Acherman et al, 1993; Vroeijenstijn, 1994b). The impact of the institutionalization and bureaucratization of the EQA program also needs to be addressed. So far it has enjoyed the novelty of youth; when it becomes an unavoidable, cyclical chore chewing up valuable time, it may lose some of its lustre. The program will almost inevitably see a gradual shift toward more quantification. To date, there has been almost no reliance on quantitative indicators, and almost no focus on "learning outcomes." Finally, the potential impact of European unity on the distinctiveness of national systems of higher education remains to be seen; this in turn could have a profound influence on the goals, scope and shape of EQA programs.

Conclusions and Speculations: Little Lessons from the Dutch

Some important lessons which American higher education has taken for granted the Dutch have taken to heart. So secure are we in our tradition of independence for higher education that we have taken autonomy for granted. Nor have we paid much more than lip service to the idea of self-improvement. When embraced, "assessment" has been applauded more for its strategic value in keeping at bay relentless demands for accountability than for its capacity to genuinely enlighten and reform. For decades, we have been quite content to allow accreditation to languish as a toothless tiger, failing to recognize the important protection to the scholarly life provided by viable non-governmental buffer agencies. Today American accreditation is on the ropes. Whether it will prevail in the face of increasing direct governmental intrusion remains to be seen. Peter Ewell, a savvy observer of the assessment scene, thinks its chances are no better than 50/50 (Ewell, 1994).

During the course of this study, events in America repeatedly demonstrated the relevance of the Dutch case. In reviewing these events, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Dutch university leaders demonstrated more foresight and strategic wisdom than their American counterparts in anticipating governmental clamor for accountability, in being pro-active with respect to it, and in constraining the role of the government in academic management and in the definition and assessment

of educational quality. At the end of 1993 the umbrella organization for regional accreditation, the Council on Post-secondary Accreditation (COPA), self-destructed. In January 1994 the Department of Education issued proposed regulations by which to enforce the Higher Education Act amendments of 1992. These regulations dictated the terms of governmental recognition of accrediting bodies, required twelve specific areas on which the accrediting bodies must have standards, imposed a federal "template" to define the content of many of these standards, and established onerous new watch-dog tasks relative to the monitoring of federal aid. They also established new bodies called SPREs (State Post-secondary Review Entities) which would review problem institutions referred by the Secretary of Education to determine if the institutions met statewide standards for continued eligibility to participate in federal financial aid programs. The SPREs were obliged to utilize "quantifiable baseline" standards in areas such as completion, retention and transfer rates. The release of the proposed regulations caused unprecedented concern and objection in academic circles, and prompted months of anxious uproar. When the dust settled with the release of the final regulations in late April 1994, the most objectionable results would seemed to have been averted. Some thought the crisis over, but most conceded that the autonomy of institutions and accreditation agencies had been eroded, that the SPREs were troubling new players on the regulatory scene, and that the relationship between American higher education and government was more unstable and unsettling that it had been in years. Soon after the Republican party captured the House of Representatives in November, the SPRE threat lessened. By statute they are functional only if Congress appropriates funds for them; at this writing (May 1995), Congress seems disinclined to fund them to the tune the Department of Education desires, and whisperings abound of SPRE repeal or modification in exchange for the development of some alternate financial accountability mechanism.

Meanwhile American accreditation scrambles to reinvent itself. Articles in the Chronicle of Higher Education suggest radical redefinition such as segmentation not by region but by institutional type (Greenberg, 1994). Here too the Dutch case offers interesting variants. What if American regional accreditation were to incorporate some kind of disciplinary focus, and in the process capitalize on the powerful motivator of professional pride among members of the academic guilds? Would that provide a more potent incentive for self-improvement? What if we did something as simple as publishing the results of self-study and peer review efforts? What effect would that have on the conduct of the players, the content of the reports, and their significance within higher education

and beyond. Recently the National Policy Board of Higher Education Institutional Accreditation (NPB), a new group which banded together upon the death of COPA to try to rescue American accreditation, endorsed in principle the idea of public reporting. Several other of the Board's proposals, viewed as leading to the nationalization of accreditation and the diminution of regional and institutional autonomy, met with opposition within the higher education community; but its determination to persist as a voice for non-governmental self-regulation is a positive development for accreditation generally, especially in this political climate less inclined toward federal intrusion.

The Dutch case suggests some potential new roles for institutional researchers. When the advent of the PC dealt a critical blow to large, centralized, isolated, number-crunching institutional research office, the literature posited a number of liberating new models for the profession: research design coach, technical consultant, master up-loader and down-loader, cartographer of the database, etc. But did we ever envision for ourselves the role of "quality counselors", group process experts engaged to help departments identify their problems and extract potential solutions? Should institutional researchers become as concerned about honing their group process skills as they are in mastering multi-variate analysis? Would American higher education be receptive to the role of "departmental researcher," a teacher/scholar in an academic unit whose professional loyalties were to that unit and whose fundamental responsibility was to monitor its progress in meeting its educational objectives? This also raises the question of whether IR people who are identified as agents of the administration can ever be effective players in the pursuit of educational quality.

Finally, the Dutch case invites us to confront our own provincialism. American educators rarely look abroad in search of solutions. We rarely even look for ideas beyond our own sector, never imagining that a university might have something to learn from a community college and vice versa. As this case demonstrates, the Dutch suffer no such affliction. They looked admiringly at other systems of self-regulation. They borrowed selectively. They built a version which at present is arguably the most vital example in the world, making use of lessons which we once taught, but somehow had forgotten.

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